P. H. Solomon

The Black Bag

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Chapter 1

The pale carcass bloated under gray dawn as the last of the storm drummed rain on the roof. The other swine shied from the prize hog as if the magic behind its sneezing death lingered in the black mud.

Within the house, Coryss blew her nose and brushed dark locks from her face. She wiped her raw eyes grown puffy with tears and ringed with dark circles. Coryss stooped over the corpses, dead from the same curse as Bandor outside. Her hands trembled over her motionless mother and father.

The door rattled in its frame and muted laughter fluttered on the wind.

Coryss ground her teeth and measured cloth for the shrouds. No rest from those bothersome hags. She rolled her Ma and Pa in the cloth and began the arduous sewing. Coryss pricked her finger with the needle and clenched her fist with a hiss. She must be clumsy with her grief. She resumed her task and the needle trailed a thin streak of her blood on the cloth with the next stitch.

The seams lengthened on the shrouds with several more red streaks as decoration. Coryss' fingers ached but she persevered for her parents.

The door rattled once again.

Coryss jerked and pricked her finger. "Enough's enough!" Her bellow rang in her ears.

Cackles whispered from beyond the closed door.

Coryss shoved her fingers into her mouth and sucked the wound. "Emuff's emuff." They weren't out there but their mockery pricked like the needle. She'd see to them as soon as… Just finish sewing.

She removed her finger from her mouth. Blood welled from the wound. She sniffed, wiped the blood on her skirt, and glared at the thin shaft of metal in her other hand.

"I'll give you more than a black-eye, Hanig the Hexer." Those witches cursed Pa's prize pig with sneezing death. If only he'd sold Bandor to the hag. She blamed herself. Coryss rubbed her damp cheek. My fist just made it worse. She caressed her mother's hair. "I'm sorry."

Tears flowed again but her cheeks heated. Those greedy hags didn't have to kill the pig

for spite. She smacked the floor. A black-eye isn't worth Ma and Pa. Petty witches. She blew her nose and snatched the needle.

"Ouch." The needle lanced her finger. She winced and gritted her teeth. "Imagine a curse that makes you prick yourself to death if you sew long enough!" She chuckled and then shivered. They'd plan something special for her. But she'd take the fight to them. Coryss pricked herself again.

She eyed the needle with her brows pinched and set it aside. "I'm finished now."

"Let us in. We'll finish the shroud!" The muted voices accompanied the familiar rattle. Laughter echoed.

Coryss snatched the needle and it stuck her. She ignored the prick and flung the needle at the door. "I'll let you in and sew your mouths shut!" She shook her fist at the door.

The needle pinged against the door and again when it struck the floor. After a moment, it rolled with ominous purpose under the door.

Coryss shivered. She tasted bile and swallowed.

She wrapped a shawl over her shoulders. Time for the burials. Coryss didn't find the needle on the threshold, but found her father's shovel in the barn. She jammed the tool into the unyielding earth near the bubbling stream. She chose the view more for herself than them. She jumped on the shovel and forced it deeper.

Coryss scrabbled at the ground for hours as the morning passed to noon while she planned her next actions. She'd take on the witches or leave. Ma'd taught her good. Coryss suppressed a sob. She wove better'n Ma. A man would have her. Folks in Ganders Fork said she'd get a good man with her skill and thick hair. Coryss tossed dirt on the pile. She could settle somewhere safe and away from them witches. Coryss brushed dangling tresses over her shoulder and heaved dirt.

She fetched the plow-horse and dragged the bodies to the graves. She gritted her teeth against sobs as she covered the bodies with soil while the day drifted past mid-afternoon. She couldn't leave them. Might as well fight since they'd find her anyway. Coryss choked on her farewells. She alone mourned the passing of Mabyss, the weaver and Gurly, the pig-herder. The house, her mother's sheep, the loom and the pigs remained for Coryss.

Later, Coryss knelt by the stream, wet her scarf and mopped her neck. Coryss winced as she soaked her pricked fingers in the cool water. She sighed. "That's better."

The sun hung low in the trees. "That took too long." Coryss dried her hands on her blue skirt. "Well, I'm too stubborn and mad to run away so I better get going. No man wants a

woman hunted by witches and dark is no time to wander the forest." She stood and brushed leaves from her skirt.

Her jaw set, she strode past the new graves and set out for Gander's Fork. Pig snorts and sheep bleats soon faded as Coryss marched through the forest. Her face burned when she stomped into the midst of the twenty, small wood and stone crofts of the village.

Dogs barked as they chased playing children. Nob's hammer beat a rhythm in the waning afternoon. Scarny's water wheel squeaked in its turning at the creek. The aroma of cooking food wafted out of open windows.

The witches' shabby hovel squatted between the road's forks like a storm cloud. The closed shutters hung askew over the windows as sporadic smoke puffed out of the chimney, first white, then black, then green, red, yellow.

Coryss' lips twitched and she squinted. That place is much worse since they arrived. Came in the night with their decay and demands. She ground her teeth and took a step toward the rotting pile.

A toy wheel struck her foot and Hoby Scarny scurried after it. Nobody even noticed her. Coryss kicked the toy away.

"Hey—," The boy's smile faded on his dust-covered face.

Coryss scowled and snarled when she spoke. "My Ma an' Pa's dead."

Hoby scampered toward his house with wide eyes.

Nob's hammering stopped and Scarny poked his head out the mill door. Confused women frowned out of windows. They noticed her now. Coryss' nostrils flared. "An' them witches what done it to 'em! How do you let 'em stay here?"

A few women shook their heads, others frowned and still others called children in and shuttered their windows.

"Hush, girl." Scarny's voice wavered as he strode toward her. "Go home before you make 'em mad!"

Coryss clenched her hands into fists at her side and leaned toward the miller. "No. I'm going do something about 'em! Who's with me?"

Those still watching gaped at her.

Coryss sniffed her disgust and started for the hovel.

Nob joined Scarny in the street. His blacksmith's muscles quivered. "Don't do it."

She marched away from both men. Cravens with muscles. Coryss walked faster lest her own resolve fade like morning fog.

"We're not part of this." She heard Scarny's mill door bang closed.

Any remaining children scattered like startled sparrows from a tree.

Her face flushed like forged iron. Go, don't stop. Her urging carried her to the door. She wrenched it open and burst in on the witches.

Hisses greeted her.

Coryss gagged at the rancid smell. She blinked. Am I falling? The weaver touched a side table and steadied her balance before she jerked her hand back as something dark skittered through the refuse. She stepped further into the room and ducked dried roots hanging from the rafters amid cured husks of lizards, snakes and nameless creatures.

Hanig, Vorxia and Nuthya hunched in the dim room like vultures eyeing a carcass from their perch. Their blood-shot eyes squinted at Coryss.

"Well?" Milk-eyed Vorxia waddled around the wax-encrusted table. A fat frog belched from its perch on her shoulder.

"Why are you here, child?" Hanig's words tickled the air like a hopeful bell. This hag's eye still bore a fading bruise. Good, that's one blow well delivered. Coryss' hand lingered near her pocket.

The weaver ignored the witches and grimaced. Horrible place. What are all these things? Coryss wobbled and forced her eyes open. Watch them closely. Hanig stood at her arm. The witch offered a gentle smile beneath eyes glittering malice as she fawned at the weaver's arm.

"I've come to—." Coryss frowned as she staggered. Her head spun and her eyelids drooped. Pickled eyeballs glared at her from bottles.

"Yes, girl?" Vorxia smiled and craned her neck.

Hanig pinched Coryss' backside.

"Ouch!" Coryss jumped away from Hanig. "Don't touch me again!"

"Nice child." The witch edged closer with a feigned cackle of friendliness.

"Watcha wantin' little weaver-girl." Nuthya's tone cut like a knife. The hag sidled away from the cauldron and brazier that sat atop a blue flame.

Those others shrank away. Coryss stepped forward and she swallowed. "I've come to challenge ya, a bet."

"A challenge." Vorxia's loose jowls shook below her working jaw.

"A bet." Hanig's tongue lolled, tasting the notion in the air.

"If I win, you leave."

"And if we win?" Nuthya craned her head forward and grinned.

"You can have whatever you want."

Vorxia squealed. Hanig capered, laughed and pinched Coryss again.

"I told you not to do that!" Coryss' voice thundered as she shoved the old woman away.

Hanig snatched up a battered kettle and charged.

Coryss' right hand smacked the witch's wrist and deflected the pot. Her left hand jabbed at the witch's face.

Hanig's nose bone snapped and blood gushed on her lips.

"Why you little…!" The battered witch erupted in screeches. Hanig charged with Vorxia coming this time too.

Coryss whipped one of her father's huge butcher knives from her pocket and crouched.

"Hold Sisters!" The two attackers froze at Nuthya's command, their long-nailed fingers raised in menace as their hissing trailed into silence. "Don't ruin our fun for later. What's the challenge, girl."

"Enter the door of my house. You have three days." Her voice rattled like wind rustling among dry reeds. Coryss backed toward the door. She dared not lower her defense for the slightest moment. Coryss stepped out the door as laughter erupted. Buzzards are friendlier. "Sunrise begins it!" The girl edged away in prudent retreat.

"Done, Weaver!" Vorxia cackled out the gaping maw of their door.

"It's too easy!" Hanig ignored her gushing nose.

Nuthya bobbed in the doorway like a buzzard hopping around a corpse. The bug-eyed witch pointed her knobby finger. "We won't need days. You'll be ours at sunrise, girl."

Coryss stumbled away from her enemy. Her legs wobbled. She smacked her thigh with her first. She'd show them her strength.

The houses loomed in the gathering gloom, their doors barred against more than the night. No help! Black windows gaped at her. They feared she'd ask for help and draw them into it. Her predicament settled on her shoulders like a criminal's sentence.

A wail squirmed in her belly and she clamped her jaws shut. What had she done? Coryss sprinted out of the village.

Her wordless scream forced her mouth ajar. Doomed! No escape now! They'd find her no matter where she went. The knives won't help! Coryss thrust tangling tree-branches away.

Her feet roiled faster along the dark path as swift as panicked birds fluttered from bushes in her passing. Tears and darkness blinded Coryss. Where's the trail? She slammed, knees and belly first, into something hard. Her breath whooshed away. She crumpled to her knees.

Coryss groaned and groped through the leaves and dirt until she found the object.

Coryss beat her fists on unyielding stones, heedless of the bruises. In a moment, her energy melted, and she wailed against the stacked rocks. “Somebody help me! Somebody help me! Somebody—”

Later, Coryss scrubbed tears from her cheeks and inspected the object of her senseless pleas. The pile of weathered stones stood waist high. What is it? A shrine to the ancient god? She sniffed. Such altars dotted Canderlin Valley. It’s mute as a tombstone. She hunched before it. No help. Tears welled in her eyes anew as her sob twisted her body. Coryss wrenched herself from the ground and stumbled for the path.

Shards of golden light beamed around her. Coryss froze. It’s too soon for the witches! Coryss shaded her face. The altar glowed, the light magnified by her tears. Her breath fluttered into stillness. Her head spun. Her knees wobbled and gave way. They’ll find me here alone. Coryss drifted from consciousness with a sigh.

Chapter 2

"Wake up, wake up."

It's momma's voice. No, someone else. Light gleamed through her squinted eyelids. A hand shook Coryss. Her eyes snapped wide. A woman's face hovered over her. Coryss screamed and scrambled away.

Coryss slammed into the altar and bounded away with a yelp. She crouched and bared her teeth. Those rocks glowed. Who's she? The altar's dark now. She has the light. Coryss fumbled for a knife. "Where is it?"

"My, but I didn't mean to startle you, deary." The stranger held her lantern higher, despite leaning on her staff, and peered at Coryss.

Coryss squinted and flinched from the light. White hair twisted into a neat bun under a scarf. Her chin's bulbous. Could be one of them in disguise. "Get away!" She snatched a stone and cocked her arm.

"O my, O my, I've gone and scared you. I'm Enthriel. I'm going to my daughter's. Her first child's coming any day." The old stranger stood undaunted under the threat of Coryss' rock. "Look here, girl, I need a bed and a meal. I can pay well too. I don't know why but not a single door was open to me in that village up the path. Are you from there?" The stranger rattled on and waved her lantern along the forest trail.

Coryss gaped. How'd I get here? I was lost. The altar wasn't near the path. She leaned against a tree and groaned.

"…and that last house…"

Coryss caught the stranger's flow of words again.

"That man threatened me with a hammer!"

Coryss dropped her stone. "What are you doing here after dark?"

"I'm—." The old woman gasped and shifted her lantern in Coryss' face. Her eyes narrowed. "Your head is cut. Who did that?"

Coryss touched her forehead, winced and stared at her bloody fingers. She glanced at the stone shrine. "They're after me, the witches."

“Witches.” The old traveler swung her light in a circle. “Nobody else around.”

“Not now. Tomorrow.” Coryss raised her hands to explain but the beginning escaped her.

The stranger almost touched Coryss. “We should look at that cut. I’ll help for a meal and a bed.” The woman shook her bag and conveyed hidden resources lay within it.

“You don’t understand, at dawn the witches will come for me. You’ll get caught in the middle.” She hated the thought of dying alone but her troubles would doom the innocent stranger. She grasped her head. She wished the spinning away, but it lingered.

“I can help there too. Is this the way?” Enthriel trudged along the path while she dangled the light ahead.

Coryss stumbled behind her. The walk loosened Coryss’ tongue and her tale spilled from her lips. The house soon shone in the light as Coryss finished her sorrowful story.

“You poor dear.” Enthriel never hesitated during the hike to the house, or the tale.

Coryss noted nothing amiss as she unlocked the cabin door, the sheep lay quiet in their pen. The pigs grunted from their own. By Enthriel’s lantern-light Coryss lit a fire for dinner.

A gleam flashed on the threshold. Coryss blinked at the sight of the cursed needle and recalled it’s repeated pricks.

Enthriel paused at the glimpse of needle lying across the entry where it rested after rolling under the door hours earlier. She bent and reached for it.

“No!” Coryss attempted pulling the other woman away. “It’s cursed. They did it.”

The elder woman hesitated. “But this won’t do at all.” She murmured under her breath , then touched the needle. Light glimmered in ripples of gold and white.

When Coryss blinked away the brightness, Enthriel held the needle between her fingers. “There, I don’t think it will do further harm.” She extended her hand. “You will use this for the sewing when the time comes.”

Coryss flinched when Enthriell dropped the needle in her palm. Nothing happened as she stood and gaped at the simple needle, her cursed source of torment heaped upon grief. As the other woman pushed into the doorway, Coryss sighed. The needle did nothing to her. Had she imagined the pricks while sewing the shrouds for her mother and father. “How did you do that?”

The visitor glanced around the room, without looking at Coryss. “Nothing of consequence, but your friends have truly wicked senses of humor”

Coryss entered, then shut the door. She dropped the needle onto the sewing table with a wary glance though nothing happened. “I’m not so sure it was cursed now.”

'That it was," said Enthriel, who then pointed to the door. "Do you have lamb's-blood yarn?"

"A bit." Coryss bumbled through the house until she found some.

"You might want to tie a piece around your doorknob and window latches for safety, so your witchy visitors won't get in."

"I doubt it will help at all."

"It will." Enthriel patted her bag.

Coryss snipped off pieces of the yarn but hesitated. If only these do work. Coryss tied a piece onto the knob and each window latch. She completed the task, collapsed into a chair and held her head.

Meanwhile, Enthriel worked on the meal and hummed a tune.

The weaver shut her eyes. What happened at that shrine? She let a stranger help her in her troubles, so she must be addled. Coryss jerked at Enthriel's voice.

"Those witches must be fearsome. Nobody was willing to take me in or share a meal." The old woman stirred the pot hanging in the fireplace. "Judging by your antics in the wood, you must be in serious trouble." While the pot steamed over the fire, Enthriel pulled a thick book from her sack and flipped through it.

"Are you a witch?" Coryss flinched at the traveler's firm stare. She's harder than the witches though she doesn't look it.

"Not even a white witch." Enthriel frowned and flipped pages. She grunted several times and snapped the book shut. "Perfect."

Coryss' stomach rumbled and her mouth watered at the enticing aroma. "What?"

Enthriel set her book aside and dipped soup into bowls. "You're a weaver." She handed Coryss a bowl and thrust her chin at the loom that squatted in one corner.

Coryss nodded as she filled her mouth. "Mmmhmm." Better than anything she ever remembered. The throb in her head subsided.

"Then you will weave your way out of this mess."

Chapter 3

Enthriel woke Coryss well before dawn. She stretched and yawned. The day would be good after such refreshing sleep. She touched the knot on her head and winced. Except for the witches.

She stood without dizziness and frowned. "Are they out there yet?" What could she do by weaving? She hoped for success but assumed a quick end. She slouched.

"Oh, they're here." The old woman leaned in the rocking chair toward the fire and extended her gnarled hands. "Mmm, that's nice on a cool morning."

Outside, hints of light edged the sky. She checked the knot of lamb's-blood yarn on the window latch. Enthriel insisted on that yarn. Coryss hoped it worked or they'd be dead as ma 'n pa. The rocker squeaked as Enthriel leaned away from the fire. Or was her enemy at the hearth? She swallowed hard and patted the knife in her skirt pocket.

"You won't need that, girl." Enthriel peered at Coryss with one eyebrow arched.

Coryss straightened her skirt.

Varied colors painted the sky as dawn's first rays flickered through the trees, but Coryss spotted no sign of the witches. Where are they? The weaver touched her knife heedless of Enthriel's assurance.

Coryss gasped and her hand froze at her pocket. Chills ran along her spine. There! Beneath the alder trees! Coryss gaped at the outlines of three hunched figures against the myriad rays of dawn sliding through the forest. They've come. Coryss' throat constricted.

"Steady, girl." Enthriel knitted by the fire. "Ready yourself at that loom!"

The new morning unfolded in silence. No birds sang to the rising sun. Coryss held her breath while nothing moved in the surrounding woodland.

The sun peeped above the horizon and sent golden beams showering through the forest boughs. The witches slouched in black capes, their faces pale in the morning.

Knobby fingers extended toward the house. Muffled words beat at the window panes.

Coryss' teeth chattered and her hair stood on end.

Every latch and knob in the house rattled. Coryss shivered. They'll tear this place apart.

The magical assault against the house heightened before sudden silence reigned.

Then the witches stood at a window. Their leering eyes rolled and searched the cabin. Spittle flew from mouths and jowls shook from screeching. Their ugly visages sneered and snarled at Coryss who cringed. They shouted curses. She wept amid the harrowing cacophony.

Enthriel sang strange words as she rocked in her chair by the fireplace.

She gasped. The spells are failing. Calm settled through Coryss.

Enthriel stopped rocking and leaned forward. "When are you going to weave?"

Coryss climbed onto her bench and worked the loom. She pushed the shuttlecock from weft to weft, and then pressed the pedals while she ignored the glowering witches. The yarn worked. If only her family had known to protect themselves with it. She wiped a tear as the doorknob rattled.

Coryss worked with fevered speed. Enthriel sat by the fire and muttered or sang. The witches withdrew from the house though the assault continued with intermittent bangs of frames and latches. They don't know someone else is here. Coryss grinned and stomped the pedal.

A green fire-ball fell from the chimney into the fire. The fireplace roared.

Coryss jumped.

Enthriel leaned into the hearth and sang. The sorcery faded to ash, its fetid stench lingered a moment before the draw sucked it from the home.

Throughout the day, frequent magical forays by the hags failed. The doors and windows proved steadfast though they bulged like bellows against the unnatural forces. The witches flashed into view at the windows alone or together and displayed by turns brooding, puzzled, or angry expressions as they screamed frustrated curses. More stinking balls dropped from the chimney in differing colors that hissed. Enthriel sang each time which snuffed the magic.

Coryss slid the shuttlecock and stomped the pedal. What restrained their magic? She brushed hair from her damp face and pressed into her work.

"Lunch." Enthriel handed Coryss food.

"Thanks." Coryss stammered with parched voice. She shoved bread and soup into her mouth. "It's better than last night."

"You're welcome."

Coryss pointed to the chimney. "How's their magic stopped."

The old woman patted her dingy tome with a grin. "These are prayers which hold

mystical sway over evil."

Coryss forgot to chew. Did Entheriel come from the shrine? The lights. She shut her mouth and wiped it.

Too soon Coryss clacked her pedals. She wove faster than she believed possible. Sweat beaded her brow as the cloth grew with her exertion. She wove with white yarn but the finished product piled blacker than coal. There's power in this. She glanced at the thread during her movements but discovered no source for the change.

At dusk Enthriel halted Coryss for dinner. She shoveled food into her mouth but stopped. A viridian tendril, viscous and dotted with sparks of magic, drifted under the door and attached itself to the cloth. A thinner line joined from the fireplace where ashen clumps of sorcery smoldered, though regular smoke escaped through the chimney. "I see the magic floats but why not earlier?"

"It has been here all day. The dark reveals darkness. You see their wicked intentions." Enthriel lowered her voice. "It is their hatred meant for you."

Coryss swallowed her bread hard and the lump crept its way to her stomach. "To what end is my work?"

"You will know soon enough, child." Enthriel patted Coryss' hand.

The meal refreshed Coryss beyond expectation, so she returned to work. The loom clattered throughout the night as she pushed the shuttlecock between wefts while the cloth lengthened.

Coryss stopped long after midnight. It's complete. She peered at the loom and her work in the dim light of guttering candles.

Enthriel sat motionless in the rocking chair with eyes shut.

Not even the wind sighed beyond the door.

In the calm, Coryss touched the black cloth. It's rough on one side and smooth on the other. What now? What power lay in her weave? What would happen if she picked at the thread? Would curses be unleashed? Coryss' head nodded as she stifled a yawn.

"Sew, child, shiny side in." Enthriel shifted in the rocker but never opened her eyes.

Coryss stirred from the loom. She cut loose the weird cloth and went to work as instructed. No pricks from the needle. Coryss wept during her needlework. She'd sewn her mother and father into burial cloths a day earlier.

Coryss' frenzied fingers completed the job near dawn. She leaned against the chair-back and held her handiwork—a bag. She folded it like laundry.

She rose and stood at the window. The witches huddled in the grey dawn near glowing coals and brewed incantations in a flame-licked cauldron.

The rocker creaked and Enthriel stood beside Coryss. "Go meet them."

Coryss wrenched the door open, stood on the porch and hugged the folded bag. She feared them no longer. She stepped off the porch at a steady pace.

"Now's your last chance. Quit your evil and go." She dropped the bag open at her side. A breeze billowed like wash in the wind.

The witches cackled and spat curses. Incantations distilled into familiar murk.

The bag swallowed the hexes.

Coryss marched unflinching at her attackers. The witches writhed and squealed. They scrambled away but fell and wallowed like pigs in the dead leaves.

"Please, we will leave you alone! Please!" Vorxia grunted and groveled on the ground.

"I gave you a chance. You're lying." Coryss stepped closer. She resisted their tricks. Words are dangerous like that trance in their home. She clenched her jaws.

Vorxia struggled and begged. "It was them, not me."

"Lies." Coryss' strides brought her within reach.

The bag sucked in the witch.

Vorxia furrowed the dirt with her fingers. The witch's tone shifted to desperation. "This can't be! My magic!"

Relentless power locked within Coryss' handiwork yanked the hag within the bag. She begged until her voice faded.

Coryss strode toward Hanig. The witch's bruised face contorted. She shoved the bag away. It sucked in her hands. She screeched and flung a final curse. It went in with her as she shrieked fading despair.

Nuthya clawed the dirt and snatched at a root. "I'll give you whatever you want! Wealth! Power!"

"What you started can't be stopped. Mercy was for yesterday, but you chose this." The unforgiving maw fluttered in Coryss' hands as if it strained for the last hag.

Nuthya ceased her struggles and slid through leaves and dirt. As she skidded in, the witch grasped at Coryss' leg and her face flashed hatred. "I won't forget this!"

She slipped into the black bag.

Silence clung in the trees.

Where did they go? If she looked they might be glaring back. She turned her head away.

Coryss balked and whirled as Enthriel touched her hand and pushed a length of lambs-blood yarn into her hand. “Tie it with this and bury it.”

“Can they return?” Coryss knotted the bag closed with the yarn.

“Not from there and not soon enough.”

Coryss paused. “I’m burying them alive?”

Enthriel shook her head. “They are imprisoned in a void of their own making.”

Satisfied, Coryss gathered her remaining strength for the final task. She hitched the horse and dragged the bag out of sight from her house. She dug a hole, heaved in the bag and covered it.

The young woman collapsed to her knees with the final duty finished. She trembled as knots released from her stomach into sobs. She never noticed her own tension before that moment.

Enthriel laid sympathetic hands on Coryss who swayed in the midst of her sobbing. “The curses meant for you have come upon them.”

Later, Coryss stirred from her tears. She kneeled alone with Enthriel’s dingy book for company.

Reader Guide: A Letter to You

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this opening book of Doors of Fantasy. There are a growing number of additional books in this short fiction series, the next being Curses Dark and Foul.

This reader guide is intended to provide you with more information about the series. I hope this initial story and this guide help you along this reading journey and the growing number of intriguing short fiction.

Thank you so much for reading the book and for spending time with me. Enjoy the series and share it with your reading friends.

In gratitude,

P. H. Solomon

P. S. As a bonus, click this link to request an Authorgraph autograph from me and I'll respond with one you can insert into your e-reader.

P. P. S. If you've enjoyed reading this book in Doors of Fantasy, you can subscribe to my newsletter for more information about my projects in-flight, fun updates about each series and news about upcoming releases. Click here to subscribe and receive another free book, sample content and coupons for merchandise (Oops, I think I gave away the surprise!).

Reader Guide: Cast of Characters

Coryss - daughter of Mabyss and Gurly

Mabyss - a weaver, wife of Gurly, mother of Coryss

Gurly - a pig-herder, husband of Mabyss, and father of Coryss

Nob - the blacksmith of Gander's Fork

Scarny - the miller of Gander's Fork

Hob Scarny - son of Scarny

Hanig the Hexer - one of three women who are recent arrivals in Gander's Fork who are reputed to be witches. She started an altercation which resulted in receiving a black eye from Coryss and precipitated a hex on a prize pig.

Vorxia - one of three women who are recent arrivals in Gander's Fork who are reputed to be witches.

Nuthya - one of three women who are recent arrivals in Gander's Fork who are reputed to be witches.

Enthriel - a woman traveling to visit family who needs shelter for a night.

Places and Animals

Gander's Fork - a village in Canderlin Valley.

Bandor - a prize pig owned by Gurly the pig-herder.

Old shrine - a religious shrine fallen into disuse and dedicated to an ancient god whose name is forgotten in Gander's Fork as well as Canderlin Valley.

Reader Guide: About Doors of Fantasy

These short fiction books are stand-alone works and do not need to be read in any order. I've simply published them in the order provided. None of the short stories have any bearing on any other the others. Excerpts from other books are from series in which the books are intentionally written in an order forming a series story-arc.

Books from Doors of Fantasy are:

The Black Bag:

Curses Dark and Foul:

Beyond Doors of Fantasy:

Reader Guide: Series FAQ

What is this series about?

Doors of Fantasy is a short fiction series of books which I have written over the years or have planned to write for some time. Some of the stories were published in a few different publications including The Black Bag which appeared in two small short fiction digital magazines which are long since defunct. Others have been laying around without any publication. Many of these stories were submitted to various publications and often received solid feedback though they were never accepted. This isn't unusual as many short fiction magazines often have a far more narrow scope of what they can use for publication. As such, many high quality short stories never see publication. Unwilling to let these stories fade into oblivion, I chose to self-publish them. I hope you enjoy all the books and stories.

The title of the series, Doors of Fantasy, merely implies that a character will pass through a door which either changes their life in some way or leads them on a journey through a fantasy realm. Some of these stories take you to a different world, while a few look at our world through the perspective of a door opened through reality as we know it.

Are there more books coming?

Yes, Curses Dark and Foul is already out and What Lies Beyond will soon arrive if it hasn't already. Additionally, I have stories written or planned that would cover about 3-5 more short anthologies. Once all the books are published, I might consider publishing a bundle of all the editions as well as a print edition, but that is still in the works as I have many other books waiting for either publication or to be written.

Where else can I find anything about your books?

More information about all my books can be found at Archer's Aim where I try to keep up about publication as much as I can.

How can I keep up with the progress of new books?

The best ways to keep up with the progress of new books by P. H. Solomon are:

Archer's Aim Digest newsletter subscription, or joining Marston's Station which is an exclusive Goodreads group for reading fans of P. H. Solomon (let me know if this link doesn't work because it expires every 30 days).

Other ways to connect with the author and support his writing career are through his merchandise store: https://archersaimpress.store

Or find all of P. H. Solomon's social media contacts in one source at Linktree.

Reader Guide: Other Books by P. H. Solomon

Looking for other ways to grab a piece of destiny?

All important links are found here

Subscribe to Archer's Aim Digest for P. H. Solomon's newsletter

Subscribe to Archer's Aim to follow P. H. Solomon's blog

Find official merchandise for this book at the Archer's Aim Press Store

Additional Fantasy Book Series by the P. H. Solomon

Doors of Fantasy Anthology Series

The Black Bag

Curses Dark and Foul, Book 2

Spheres of Dread and Wonder (upcoming first quarter of 2023)

The Cursed Mage Case Files:

The Changeling Incident (a prequel story)

The Order of the Dark Rose, Volume 1

Assassin's Dark Rose (a short misadventure) due out in early 2023

The Unseen Hand, Volume 2 (due out in early 2023)

The Nine Jewel Heist, Volume 3 (due out in the last half of 2023)

The Bow of Hart Saga by P. H. Solomon:

Trading Knives (free prequel novella)

What Is Needed (prequel novella)

The Bow of Destiny

An Arrow Against the Wind

The White Arrow

Thanks for purchasing/downloading this book. It is also available in the following formats if you are interested.

Free Audio of this book:

Trading Knives

Other Upcoming Series

Assassin's Black Glove

Treasure Stolen – Returned

The Broken Shield Chronicles

Heir of Hart (the sequel saga of The Bow of Hart Saga)

Reader Guide: Excerpt From The Bow of Destiny

THE BOW OF DESTINY: Book 1 of The Bow of Hart Saga

"Solomon has his own signature touch..., original and unique" - ★★★★★ Fantasia Reviews 2016 Book of the Year

"...one can almost see the trail, and fear the trolls" - ★★★★★ Reader Review

"the characters are still dancing around in my head, the sign of a fantastic journey" - ★★★★★ Reader Review

Haunted by his past. Hunted in the present. Uncertain what is real.

Athson suffered hallucinations ever since he was orphaned, including a dog no one else sees. The will in his possession, bestowed in a dream, can't be real. But the trolls now hunting him are. A destiny, both inconvenient and unavoidable, drags Athson into an unwanted quest that challenges all his assumptions.

Can he trust anyone?

Sworn to secrecy by his dead father about the bow, Athson wants nothing to do with it. A dragon and a wizard want the bow - and Athson dead. Running from the quest and his destiny are tempting options.

Then he finds something unexpected. Will his discovery destroy him before he recovers the bow?

Excerpt

When his dead father touched his hand, Athson almost dropped the arrow. He squeezed his eyes shut. Ignore him. Focus. He took a slow, deep breath. Not this, not now.

"That's it, slow breaths, steady your hands." His father helped him nock the arrow.

"You're not here. You're dead." Athson whispered lest he startle his prey. He didn't need help with the arrow.

"And Athson, make sure you keep that secret I trusted with you." Ath's hand dropped away.

"I've held my tongue." Athson's lip quivered, and he forced his hands steady. A memory and nothing more. That's what he got for forgetting his medicine. But he had kept the secret over the years since his father taught him the bow that day.

Athson knelt on one knee with an arrow nocked and gauged each target. Wind gusted and flattened grass in its weaving dance. Waves boomed against the Sea of Mist's rocky shore beneath the cliff's edge two hundred strides distant. The pheasant was trickier, he decided. The rabbit would do. His gaze shifted between the two animals. No shakes, no more old memories while cleaning the kill. He brushed the vane feather with his thumb. But the memory didn't bode well.

Athson eased into his stance at the shaded edge of forest, waiting unseen by his prey. The wind fell still. He drew the arrow to his cheek, aimed, and exhaled. A litter of kits hopped near his intended meal. He blinked. No killing a mother. He shifted targets and released.

The arrow sprang away in silence and pierced the green-feathered head.

Athson strode from hiding, high grass tangling at his shins. The rabbit and her litter scrambled into their hole. "You're safe this time."

He squatted by the pheasant and plucked out chestnut tail feathers. When he cut the striped neck, Athson shut his eyes. The less blood seen, the better, to avoid the memories. Athson yanked his arrow loose with a grunt. "Sarneth sends me to the middle of nowhere, so I waste time hunting." Father plucked the arrows with more care. Maybe his father should have used other things with the same care.

He thrust with his belt-knife and gutted the bird. Torn innards stank. Images flashed behind his eyes of bodies writhing as weapons were yanked free. He swallowed. Why this, why now? He sat on his heels and counted the months since his last fit. Over a year, and his elvish tincture of Soul's-ease lay forgotten at the ranger station. Not good. He needed that medicine. He rubbed his temples. Fits were hard, but seeing things later confused him. He sighed. Days of parsing reality lay ahead. Gweld, his elven friend and fellow ranger, would be disappointed at his laxness with the medicine.

He buried the bird's offal well away from his camp. Athson brushed a hand over his eyes with a sigh. No shakes, no memories. He took a deep breath and marched away, teeth grinding. He needed to seek peace and not anger. The wind picked at foliage and birds called in the forest. But tension clung to his shoulders.

At his campsite Athson hung his kill over his fire from a makeshift spit. Early chill sent him gathering more firewood, a worthless duty at an empty border. He eyed the stand of fir trees, doing anything but thinking. They were a good windbreak but wouldn't guard against that night's nip. Building a canopy of fir limbs near the fire at the opening would warm his cold feet.

The breeze rose stiff with the promise of a frigid bite later as Athson gathered armloads of deadwood. "I'll need that canopy." The gust blew stiffer.

Athson frowned at the smoke marking his position for miles when he approached his camp and muttered in dissatisfaction. Rocky ground and no smokeless pit-fire. He shrugged off the irritation. "There're no trolls this far west in the Auguron Forest."

Racing the dusk while gathering firewood was all the excitement Athson encountered. He snagged another fallen limb, hurrying more now to check his roasting pheasant than to beat nightfall.

The wind shifted and carried the hint of smoke from his campfire. Sudden nausea left him unsteady. Memory of other fire on a different night quickened his heart. Athson snagged the last of the wood for his final armload.

"You take this bag and hide."

"Leave me alone mother, you're long gone." Athson coughed and stumbled over roots.

Smoke curls through the thatch over the rafters. His mother shoves food and a coat into the bag.

That wasn't now, that was ten years past. He groaned and blinked a tear away.

Athson sank to his knees and coughed against choking smoke. *His mother acts calm but he sees fear in her wide, hazel eyes and her rigid movements. Smoke thickens and flames roar beyond the door. The warning horn blows. Screams erupt outside and mingle with joyous snarls of attacking trolls.*

Athson's mother heaves him out the window. "Hide as best you can."

They both cough. Athson nods and opens his mouth.

The door slams open. His mother snatches an iron skillet and cracks a hobgoblin in the face. The attacker collapses but others leap through the door. His mother yells and flails with the skillet.

Athson ducks away and runs into the night amid the dancing light of burning Depenburgh.

He coughed and shook his head and found himself on trembling hands and knees. The armload of wood lay scattered where he had fallen. He swore and ground his teeth. "Get up and see to the bird."

Athson lunged from the ground, forgetting his wood, and wrenched his gaze away from the mound of the pheasant's buried offal. Dinner needed attention. Athson's dragging boots as he stumbled along sounded like shovels biting the dirt.

"This is taking too long." Athson's father stands massaging his back, his haggard face smudged with soil. The other men pause, sweat drenching their chests. "We need a pyre for this many bodies. We need to search for prisoners." He means his wife, Danilla. The men nod and shift scarves over their faces against coffin flies and stench as they trudge off in search of surviving wood.

Athson braced himself against a tree. "Go away, father. You're dead." Fir limbs caressed his face and clothing as Athson marched into his camp. "Forget the past. They're gone!" He kneeled and reached for the spit with a trembling hand.

The wind shifted and billowed smoke into his face. Athson choked, coughed, and turned his face from the smoke.

Ath scratches the dark bristles grown over his face during the days of troll-hunting since they set out from Depenburgh. "We take back Danilla and the others now. If the wizard arrives, we have no chance." Athson's father hisses plans to his seven comrades - huntsmen turned would-be rescuers. Bon-fires flicker along the Funnel where the trolls hold their prisoners at their altar. Ath fixes each man with his dark-eyed gaze.

Athson grabbed his head. "Go away, leave me alone!" His shout echoed through the forest, startling a dove. They were all gone, but he'd still never tell anyone.

Whispered plans meld into action as Athson's father leads the other hunters toward the leaping troll-fires. Shouts and clanging steel announce the raid. Shadows weave among the blazes in the night wind. Fierce snarls answer angry shouts. Trussed prisoners wail for help.

Ominous silence interrupts the clash of weapons.

His father shouts. "Run, Athson, run!" The desperate command echoes in Athson's memory.

Another voice laughs in mockery. "Run, Athson, run."

Athson crouches and hugs himself. The fear and cold bite him into shivers.

Another man stands visible in the troll camp. His bald head glistens in the firelight while his hooked nose lends him a lingering sneer. "I'm Corgren. Come into my camp, boy, and I will welcome you. You will be safe. I can help you."

Athson squeezed his eyelids, but the face remained. He would find the wizard—no, he

couldn't seek revenge. He wouldn't even search. Athson hunched and gasped.

Athson wants to comply, wants a warm fire but hesitates.

"If you don't come, bad things will happen." Corgren waves trolls into the concealing heather.

The choice hangs in the air like meat smoking over a fire. Athson weighs his choices and almost shouts for his father.

"Run, Aths—" His father's voice cuts short in mid-shout with a muted grunt. The frightened boy trembles.

Trolls snort and tramp into the undergrowth.

Athson bolts into the night and falls into a crevice along the Funnel's rocky edge. Trolls miss him in the dark. The next day, Athson finds his father's broken sword in the abandoned camp.

Athson startled from his fit. He squatted among the trees, poised for dashing away as his escape from trolls faded. Athson's chest heaved. Sweat beaded his face and stained his tunic. He gripped handfuls of dirt and fir needles.

"You are safe in Auguron, among the elves. Heth and Cireena raised you. Mother, father, and the others died years ago. You have friends like Gweld who helped you." But he would never forget their names or their faces. Danilla. Ath. He exhaled raggedly. He hugged himself and rocked while he hummed a lullaby his mother sang when he still clung to her skirts.

He swore again. The bird hung unturned, scorching over the fire. He scrambled to his feet and rushed to his burning dinner.

Meat sizzled over the fire as Athson knelt and tended his meal. His trembling hands grew still over slow minutes. Memory-fits! They froze him like wounded prey. They were gone. Why now? Not the dead bird. The smoke? "There's no peace in western Auguron either. It's what I get for a good deed with that rabbit." He pulled an angry frown and threw a pebble into the fir trees.

Athson turned back to his fire. A two-toned dog sat by his pack, brown sides flexing with each pant. "Spark?"

The dog's pointed ears twitched at his name and his tail thumped the ground.

Athson squinted at the Mountain Hound's shiny black back. "Where've you been?" He knew the answer. He always saw Spark after a fit. "You're not real." But the dog comforted him. Still, it was bad when Spark appeared. Soul's-ease left the body too soon.

Athson sighed and rubbed the heels of his palms against his eyes. Calm returned, and he went back for his dropped armload of wood. He gathered what he could find as dusk faded to night. On returning to camp, he fed the fire and then from his pack pulled dried fruit brought

to the ranger station from the trading post in Afratta days earlier.

He tore a leg off the pheasant and tasted hot meat, then offered some to Spark. As usual, the dog took nothing. Athson scratched the dog's ears and sighed. "Well even if you're not real it's still good to see you."

After eating, Athson built up the fire and warmed his hands against the chill sweeping inland from the Sea of Mists. The moon rose in the east, lighting the promontory named Eagle's Aerie, rumored home of a Withling. The pinnacle jutted into the sky above the surrounding fir trees, stretching north into the Sea of Mists' crashing breakers. He spied in the glow of moonlight the slender shadow of the endless stair stretching like an age-line along the cliff's face.

Gweld and other elven rangers had told him stories about Eagle's Aerie when word of Sarneth's assignment to Western Auguron got out. Tales spoken in the barracks hinted of hidden treasure and attempts to climb those stairs, but no one ever completed the task that Athson heard. Athson snorted. "Wild tales made up for my benefit."

Rangers told Athson that travelers reported an old woman of the mystic Withling order appeared in the area, lending aide or leading folks to dire ends. "And Withlings are good and wise agents of Eloch? Thanks for the fool's errand, Captain Sarneth." Athson tossed a stick into the fire with an irritated grimace and saluted the air. Sarneth either didn't trust Athson with more serious assignments or suspected him for some reason. How could Sarneth know more about him than Athson told or knew of his past?

At least Gweld was on the same duty. Athson would meet his oldest friend back at the ranger station in several days' time.

He muttered the elvish festival song, "Dance with the Moon." He smiled at the thought of elves dancing on a midsummer night and sighed as tension left his shoulders. Spark groaned in relief. Strange that he could hear the dog when nobody else did.

Athson yawned. Weariness gripped him soon after his memory-fits. Best not to fight sleep. He fed wood into the fire, pulled his blanket from his pack, and spread it over himself as he stretched out. Sleep soon covered him like a blanket, his thoughts of making a fir-limb shelter forgotten along with enigmatic Withlings and ten-year-old sorrows.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

He struggles to breathe. Trolls stab helpless villagers through sliding curtains of choking smoke and raging flame. Dying children wail as mocking slayers howl. The violence fades into darkness. He flails and fears he lies in a grave yet finds emptiness instead of dirt.

Silver light rises and Eagle's Aerie soars beneath the moon. Athson climbs the weather-worn stair and scraps his hands as he gains speed. The rock-face blurs as Athson swoops onto the pinnacle towering over the ocean, stands where no one ever has, sees what has been hidden.

Athson pauses and then floats toward a voice murmuring by a swaying flame within a shadowed crevice.

A silhouette kneels and rocks, dark against the fire beyond it. A woman's uneven voice chants:

"The bow shall be hidden from heart..."

The swaying speaker feeds wood into the fire. Sparks snap from the coals and whirl amid the orange-blue tongues. An arc forms in the smoke and fades into the stars.

"The eagle will guide the heir..."

An eagle's scream pierces the night wind.

"The bow shall be found at need..."

Wrinkled hands tie a wad of cloth with string - a bowstring.

"And the arrow shall Eloch prepare."

A shooting star streaks across the horizon and drags Athson's attention from the crouching figure before the popping fire.

The eagle screams again - louder and nearer.

The figure half-turns and tosses the packet at Athson's feet. He stares at it, then back to the kneeling woman. Her face half-lit by the firelight reveals a pointy nose that overshadows her receding jaw. Grizzled wisps of gray hair wave in the wind. "For you who suffers in silence for a secret."

Athson stoops and inspects the package. He unties the knot and pushes the string into a pocket. Within the cloth he finds a tattered note and more fabric he guesses is a pennant.

"Zelma's done it." She gazes skyward and raises her arms.

"Why more now when so much has been taken already? Why me?" His anger flares and he tosses the packet away. "This isn't mine." He whirls and stumbles into darkness.

"He needs to see." The woman's voice screeches and slices through whistling wind.

The eagle's deafening scream stabs his awareness as immense wings snap like a clap of thunder. Talons tear clothing, pierce flesh and snatch Athson into the air. He dangles and kicks as he yells while silver landscape yawns beneath him. The curious sound of joyous cackling trails into the distance.

Athson squeezes his eyes shut but dares squinting at the moonlit sky that stretches overhead. The land wheels as the eagle glides over earth mottled by shadow and pale light. The world unfolds as Athson glimpses far beyond the distant Drelkhaz Mountains to the far eastern shores of the great

Endless Sea.

His vision focuses on an old woman as she rests by her campfire on an empty plain south of Auguron. She stirs from sleep and cocks her head as if listening. She gazes at Athson. His vision whirls away from her as she rises in her gray dress.

A beautiful young woman rides along a road beneath tufts of glowing clouds. Her braided hair dangles over her left shoulder and she wears pale leather armor and leggings made for dueling. The hilts of two of swords protrude above each of her shoulders. She brushes her face as if wiping away a tear.

Darkness descends over both Athson and the eagle. The giant bird glides in silence.

A knife glitters pale in the darkness. It slashes in a vicious arc and then pauses. Blood covers the weapon and drips from the tip. Athson shouts in dismay but wind thrusts it back into his mouth. His own Rokan dagger bought in a fit of anger when Sarneth withheld his father's sword. The blood chills him worse than the wind or the eagle's hold.

The eagle's screech pierces his hearing and its wings drum thunder. Athson trembles as darkness recedes. The bracing wind slaps his face.

Shadowy wings ride wind from the south. The figure blots out stars as it swings north and glides on a shifting course. The eagle shrieks in defiance at the approaching beast. Fire belches amid an answering roar. Athson yells as the giant bird dives at the black shape. Ragged wings, so dark they drink moonlight, flutter against frigid air. Eagle and dragon glide and twist past each other.

The streaking shadow trails fire and a rotten stench. Athson struggles to name the creature until one thought flares: Magdronu.

The eagle dives. Athson flails his arms and legs as he screams.

And then the talons release him.

Find The Bow of Destiny here.

Find more information about the book at The Bow of Destiny FAQ and Information

Reader Guide: Excerpt An Arrow Against the Wind

An Arrow Against the Wind

Book 2 of The Bow of Hart Saga

Haunted by his past. Hunted in the present. Tossed like an arrow in the wind.

Athson discovered the unexpected during the search for The Bow of Hart. Yet the prophesied weapon remains hidden.

Mysteries discovered during the quest draw him deeper into the peril. The flames of vengeance surge in his thoughts with new revelations.

Can he escape the traps of his enemies?

The dragon's reach endangers even Athson's companions in unexpected ways. His enemy wants the bow, but his mentor claims it must be used according to prophesy. With each turn of the search for the bow, long-hidden secrets surface and Athson must find the bow or risk losing those dear to him.

When the dragon gains leverage over him, Athson is torn between destiny and desire.

But Athson seeks his own path.

Will he falter like an arrow against the wind?

Grab a piece of destiny now.

Excerpt

Days of pursuit slipped past Athson like a dream of eating, sleeping, and tracking. The trail into the Troll Heaths led him unerringly after Corgren and the Bane. Spark trailed Athson throughout the days of cold and lay near him in the dark, keeping him warm just as the dog had cared for him once he first escaped the Funnel years earlier. And now Athson stalked his enemy willingly back to the place of his losses, a journey of years he for which he sought an end.

The wind roared and buffeted Athson like attacking trolls when he crept through the pass above the Funnel. He crouched behind a screen of boulders with Spark. Below, the flat shelf of rock stretched to the sheer cliff edge above the river that swept swiftly. Corgren directed the Bane toward the Altar of the Trolls that hated stone where Corgren sacrificed to Magdronu. Limbreth lay limp in the Bane's hold. She must be alive. Athson shifted his gaze. Ath lay in a disheveled heap near the wizard.

Spark panted within Athson's reach. He strung the Bow of Hart. "I'll use it now." It must possess the necessary power to do what he needed now, just like his sword. The mountain hound panted, unmoving where he sat.

Athson peered out his hiding again. The worn path wandered onto the wide rock-shelf. That was no good. Corgren would see him. The rocky slope bent away south and turned toward the edge of the Funnel, cutting off the shelf. If only he could scramble among the boulders and attack at the closest point to Corgren.

He motioned Spark and worked his way among the rocks along the slope, his cloak pulled close for concealment. The high wind prevented any attempt at a long shot. But as he went, Athson spotted a high boulder near enough to the wizard. He might release an arrow from there with good result. This bow of prophecy must do the job. He had nothing else at hand to even his odds. He was the only one left to help Limbreth and his father. His stomach fluttered. The only one left.

Athson worked his way with care among the rocks. The constant rush of wind along the gorge covered any noise he caused. He crept down to the boulder close to Corgren. Ath lay twenty paces way. He might be asleep. Athson nocked an arrow.

Corgren whirled and gazed along the slope. "Come out, ranger. I know you're here." The wizard motioned to Limbreth where she lay on the altar by the Bane. "I have your woman. She'll die unless you give me the Bow of Hart."

The Bane brandished a wolf's-head dagger.

Athson gritted his teeth. It was like the one he carried, the one with which the Bane had

murdered Heth and Cireena. A choice lay before him - the Bane or Corgren. If anything could kill that creature it was this bow. Either shot was a risk but taking down the Bane secured Limbreth. Athson ran his fingers along a feathered vane.

He rose in shadow from behind the boulder, drew the arrow and aimed for the Bane.

"Reveal yourself and turn it over. You have no choice unless you want her to die. Like your mother on that very rock." Corgren laughed.

Athson suppressed a scream. Heat flooded his veins. His heart pounded. Athson shifted his aim and released. At Corgren…

Find An Arrow Against the Wind here

Find more information about the book at An Arrow Against the Wind FAQ & Information

Reader Guide: Excerpt from The White Arrow

The White Arrow

Book 3 of The Bow of Hart Saga

"Twists and turns" with "stop in your tracks kind of moments." ★★★★★

Bound to prophecy, his destiny balanced on an arrow's tip.

With the Bow of Hart in hand, Athson is hunted by his enemies. His mistakes haunt him as much as his past.

Magdronu plots to thwart the prophecy as his trolls attack Auguron City.

Hastra the Withling reveals Eloch will send an arrow for the bow. But when the arrow arrives, it is from an unexpected source and lands in unforeseen hands. Events twist like an arrow in flight…

Can Athson overcome his past and use the Bow of Hart as intended?

The archer and the bow await the coming arrow…

Excerpt

Apeth pushed himself to his feet, stepped around the fire and knelt before Athson. He touched Athson's head and whispered a word Athson never heard clearly though it echoed across his mind in a moment that passed like hours.

Wellness covered Athson in an instant like a raincoat donned in a sudden downpour of rain. The cascade of sickness rolled from him and the fever fell away. His dizziness ceased

and his vision snapped into clarity along with his thoughts. Weariness clattered from his limbs like loosened manacles from a prisoner. He gasped in delayed reaction to the Withling's healing.

Apeth Stellin withdrew across the fire and rolled his bedding. "I was wondering why I was withheld from healing you immediately. And now it's clear."

Athson stood and inhaled deeply. "Thanks for that but I don't follow your meaning."

"We need to move." Apeth pointed toward the cave entrance past the mule. "That wandering star is a sign. We aren't the only ones to have seen it. You can bet Magdronu is seeking the arrow because of the sign. North is our way, but choices lie ahead for you."

Athson shoved the last of his venison in his mouth and chewed. In his mind, there was but one choice. "I see one way ahead."

Apeth tugged at the brim of his hat and his blue-eyed gaze twinkled at Athson. "Oh, you have choices. What to do with the bow. Whether to finish this quest and find the arrow." With his arms spread wide, Athson lifted his gaze to the darkened cave roof rising above them. "Don't you see? There's no need for choices. Everyone's dead that matters to me. My father. Limbreth. My companions. I can only see my way to one thing now and that's bartering for my mother's freedom."

"That's a choice to let the curse on you continue to grasp your life, Athson, continue to let Magdronu's evil control you. You have a choice to stop it." Apeth stepped close again, his gaze intense but not threatening. "As for Limbreth, by your dream, I wouldn't assume anything about her fate. But there are choices ahead. Will you go as far as Marston's Station with me before you make your final choice about the bow?"

Athson nodded. "I'll go that far. I need supplies. But there's no other choice for me."

"Oh, but there is. Your dreams indicate something you must face." Apeth gathered his things and paused in front of Athson.

Athson crossed his arms. "What must I face?"

"That you are gifted to be a Withling, asked to serve Eloch with everything you've been given." The Withling strode toward the mule.

Athson's head spun anew but not from fever. Light from the wandering star glimmered in the entrance of the cave and lit the Bow of Hart where he'd left it near the mule. His anger burst in a sudden bellow, "No!"

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Reader Guide: About the Author

I've always been a fantasy geek. Books by authors like Tolkien, McCaffrey, McKillip and more stoked my imagination on frosty winter nights as much as the fireplace warmed my limbs. Now I love writing my own fantasy tales. My imagination merges with my sense of everyday courage as I tell stories about characters challenged by life as they discover they matter. My background in anthropology mingles with my fantasy settings as my characters seek truth beyond their quests and adventures. Join me on the fantasy path and let's share a book at the fire.

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